

Oregon Zoo's Rare Ocelot Kitten Makes Debut

by Bend Weekly News Sources

The Oregon Zoo's rare ocelot kitten made his much-anticipated debut Tuesday, Dec. 19, at 10 a.m. The public is invited to see the adorable kitten in person, welcome him to the zoo and learn his new name.

"He is growing by leaps and bounds," said Mitch Finnegan, zoo veterinarian. "He is about half the size of his mother at only 3 months and will eventually outweigh her."

Closely following in mom's footsteps, the kitten has been cautiously exploring his lush new living space -- part of the zoo's Amazon Flooded Forest exhibit -- for the past few days. He has been spotted chewing on leaves and testing his climbing abilities.

Zoo officials plan to announce the new ocelot's name Tuesday as well. Last month, keepers sought the public's help in naming the kitten, having narrowed the choices down to three favorites: Rio (meaning "river" or "laugh" in Spanish or Portuguese), Mo (short for monkey, because the kitten lives in the zoo's Primate Building, which has been expanded to include species in South America and the Amazon) and Bonito (meaning "beautiful" or "pretty" in Spanish).

Votes are still being accepted through Monday, Dec. 18, at 5 p.m. To vote for your favorite name, please go to: http://www.oregonzoo.org/Voter/vote_form.cfm.

Before being introduced to his new surroundings, the ocelot kitten had been receiving around-the-clock care from his mother, Alice, in a secluded birthing den. The kitten has had check-ups from the zoo's vet staff, but in general the zoo is letting mom take care of her baby.

"The kitten is showing many characteristics of a wild ocelot," said Tony Vecchio, zoo director. "The little guy is pretty energetic and becoming bolder every day. I know our visitors will absolutely love watching him grow."

The ocelot was born Sept. 9 and continues to be nurtured by his mother, Alice. She and her mate, Ralph, came to the zoo on April 22.

Zoo staff was not expecting a baby so soon, but has been prepared from the start. The exhibit was designed specifically with breeding the ocelots in mind, and off-exhibit holding space for an expecting mother and her kittens had already been provided.

Ralph, Alice and the kitten belong to the southern Brazilian species of ocelot, *Leopardus pardalis mitis*, which inhabits the tropical and subtropical forests of southern Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina.

Since 2002, the Oregon Zoo has been working with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Brazilian Ocelot Consortium and the government of Brazil to play a role in the ocelot's survival. It was determined several years ago that the ocelot population of North American zoos should be replaced by a genetically defined subspecies -- the Brazilian ocelot. The Oregon Zoo is one of 10 U.S. zoos involved with the consortium.

"Our new baby is a charismatic ambassador for his species," said Vecchio. "He's educating people about the importance of saving these rare cats -- and their ever-shrinking habitats."

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